



2021 STATE OF THE CITY

YONKERS

MAYOR MIKE SPANO

MARCH 25, 2021



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Good evening members of the City Council, all City, School, State and County representatives and fellow Yonkers residents watching remotely.

You may notice today's presentation looks and feels a bit different from years past. A global pandemic will do that I guess. Believe me, I'd much rather be addressing you in person then virtually, but as we all know, this has become our new reality.

Before we begin, I want to recognize former Yonkers Idol, Ada Victoria Israel, for helping us kick off today's presentation. I'm sure we will see a lot more of Tori very soon.

I stand before you this evening in awe – in awe of the people I've had the privilege to meet and work with during a year that's weighed so heavily on us. Individuals, who despite facing unprecedented challenges, have continued to forge ahead and strive to beat the odds.

Because of the ingenuity, compassion and determination of our great citizens, the State of our City is stronger than ever.

Thanks to your support, I have been energized to lead this city during some of its darkest days, yet, look forward to our best days ahead because we are strong – Yonkers Strong!

No place has demonstrated greater strength than our schools.

For a year now, teachers, administrators and students across this city have had to reimagine what it means to educate and learn. Last spring's shut down taught us new terms like remote learning and zoom. Thanks to the commitment of our Board of Education Trustees and Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Edwin Quezada, our schools rose to the challenge. Funding was put in place to ensure Chromebooks, laptops and Wi-Fi were made available to families who needed them. While it wasn't conventional, teachers resumed instruction from the classroom while their students zoomed in to their lesson plans from home.

Although we've successfully pivoted, it's not ideal. We all want our students in the environment that's best for learning. That's why earlier this month, I tasked our Superintendent to devise a safe, operational plan to reopen our schools. Starting April 12th, we are sending our students back to the classroom four days a week, while still offering the option of remote learning.

Some might be resistant to this idea, but let me ask you, if not now, when?

Data supports our quest to reopen our doors. Since Yonkers Public Schools opened with hybrid instruction in October 2020, less than 2% of the total school population has been infected with COVID-19. Only a third of those who opted for in person instruction actually attend. That leaves ample space for additional students. Attendance at Yonkers schools with predominately economically disadvantaged students is even less. And as guidance suggests, students can be in school with less than 6 feet of physical distancing and appropriate barriers. This is something that the District is doing.

Another reason to reopen: research has determined there are significant academic and social-emotional impacts on children while learning remotely and in isolation.

The District has already invested \$12 million to provide for a safe and healthy learning environment including air filtration systems, repaired windows, temperature scanners, and more frequent cleaning schedules.

And to assist those students who have fallen behind this year, I am asking the State to invest \$3 million so we can offer them instruction in the summer months. We need all hands on deck to repair the damage this pandemic has caused.

The global pandemic has only shined a brighter light on our capacity needs. You've heard me say it again and again: we are 4,500 seats over capacity, we have crumbling buildings -- nine of which are over 100 years old.

We remain committed to the cause. In addition to needing a change in the annual operating formula, we are also advocating for a \$100 million Capital Block Grant to offset taxpayers' share to rebuild our schools. We recently purchased the property at the former St. Denis School site in SW Yonkers to construct a new community school for grades pre-k through 8. However, under current state reimbursement formulas and double MCA, we can only build this one new school, when we need at least two more, not to mention the need to rehabilitate more than 30 other schools. Making temporary repairs to keep schools operating is not a good choice. Our students cannot wait. It is time to rebuild Yonkers schools.

The responsibility of maintaining the safety of our students doesn't end in the classroom. This year, I signed legislation that will allow Yonkers to affix cameras to city school buses to help identify motorists who fail to stop at the buses' red light signs. Our hope is to deter vehicles from passing when red lights are flashing. Our students are our precious cargo and their safety is paramount.

Despite the challenges our students face, they still continue to amaze us. Our graduation rate has been on an upward trend since 2011 – up nearly 20%. In fact, in 2020 Yonkers became the first and only of New York's big cities to exceed a 90% graduation rate, surpassing many of the wealthier districts, including some here in Westchester County. Special thanks to our Yonkers teachers for continually committing themselves for the betterment of our students and their futures.

Yonkers also continues to make strides when it comes to ensuring our young men of color are ready for college or career. In just five years, Yonkers My Brother's Keeper has made a name for itself, having been recognized by the Obama Foundation with the National Impact Community Award, and just recently was the only MBK Chapter to be selected to sit down with the former President on national television to discuss our efforts. What a proud moment for me as mayor!

Thank you and congratulations to everyone who make the lives of these young men better especially our MBK mentors and leaders.

Thank you's are also in order for our students in the Yonkers Partners in Education program. Working with our Office for the Aging and its NNORC program, Y-PIE Tech Squad students are using their tech savviness to bridge the generation gap. They routinely spend time with our seniors to teach them how to use technology to battle social isolation during the pandemic – like texting, emailing and zooming. I bet they even taught them the do's and don'ts of selfies! Perhaps the greatest assistance they've given is the time spent phone banking with seniors, registering them for vaccine appointments. Their knowledge of technology and their willingness to help their community speaks volumes about the character and talent of Yonkers students!

The digital divide extends to our economically challenged students as well. Community partners including the City, the Westchester County Association, Fordham University, Y-PIE and the STEM Alliance, joined to address issues related to digital equity in Yonkers and bring new technology to at-risk families to support their education. The collaborative effort, named Y Zone, is aimed to find a permanent solution to this problem once and for all. So tonight, I am happy to announce that together with our newest partner, WestHab, Y Zone has been awarded a \$300,000 grant by the National Science Foundation that when combined with other grants we can introduce free, high speed Wi-Fi to hundreds of families.

No discussion about the strength of our city can be had without spotlighting the great work of our first responders. This year has been challenging for them and I am proud to say they have risen to the occasion.

In many ways, 2020 became a year of introspect and renewal for police departments across the country. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others ignited a long-overdue conversation on the implicit bias that lives among us. Here, we embraced calls for social justice. Upwards of 1,000 people peacefully protested, walking along side hundreds of our officers. After a tumultuous summer, Yonkers set the standard on how we can lawfully assemble and exercise our first amendment rights without injury or damage to others. This is a testament to you and our Police Department.

But it took us time to get here. Prior to my administration, the United States Department of Justice investigated Yonkers for excessive use of force and discriminatory policing. Since I took office, Yonkers has implemented some of the most progressive and effective policies – supported by the DOJ, Yonkers City Council, Yonkers Police Department and local civic leaders.

Some of the new approaches implemented include the banning of chokeholds, limiting stops and searches and fully investigating misconduct complaints and procedural justice training. We even laser focused community policing when we opened a new YPD Annex at Newell Hall in Getty Square. As a result of these and other measures, Yonkers Police have seen a 50% decrease in civilian complaints and a nearly 40% decrease in crime since 2011.

Another arsenal in our belt, if you will, is the launch of a police body-worn camera program that will be fully operational this spring. We are even looking at a pilot program that installs dash cams on our patrol vehicles. These devices are safeguards for residents and officers alike.

Programs like this are just the beginning in reimagining police training in our department, but it doesn't end there.

Under the direction of Commissioner John Mueller, the Yonkers Police Department is one of just 30 departments nationwide to participate in Georgetown University Law Center's prestigious ABLE Project. The training gives officers the tools they need to overcome the innate obstructions individuals face when called upon to intervene in actions taken by their peers. In other words, teaching our officers they can speak up to their peers and prevent another George Floyd scenario.

This fall, I also convened a 25-member Police Reform Committee comprised of trusted and diverse voices in our community, including faith-based leaders, community leaders, elected officials and even our law enforcement. In all, 22 inclusive reforms were set forth and posted for public comment. After City Council approval, we sent it to New York State for review and funding. I want to personally thank each committee member for giving their time and support so we can advance the work of our Police Department and the community it swears to protect.

One suggested reform by the Committee that I've been advocating for since my first day in office is to better diversify the makeup of the department so it better reflects the people they serve. I am proud to say that since 2012, we've doubled the amount of black and brown officers – but we need to do more. That's why this year's recruitment efforts include an \$80,000 investment to improve candidates understanding of the State's Law Enforcement Exam and improve their test taking skills. Police Tutorial Services is a contracted service that includes 32 hours of in-person class time taken over the course of 16 weeks. We need to make sure that after we target a diverse group of men and women who want to take the police test, they meet NY State's civil service hiring requirements. I know we will see ample return on our investment.

Our first responders are also making sure you remain safe at home. Did you know that fires in homes with no smoke alarms cause an average of 940 deaths per year? What's more disturbing is that 95% of Yonkers fatal fires occur in our city's most vulnerable populations. Teaming with FEMA, the Yonkers Fire Department is delivering over 2,000 non-replaceable lithium ion battery operated smoke and C.O. alarms, as well as an additional 500 hearing impaired units to some of our city's most at-risk residents. Special thanks to the YFD who partnered with our fire unions and other local agencies to distribute these life-saving devices.

In all, our frontline workers fought hard this year, particularly against COVID-19. In total, nearly 300 Yonkers police and fire members were infected. Along with Empress Ambulance and countless Yonkers healthcare workers, let's be sure to thank all our first responders who each year routinely risk their lives for us.

When we talk of Yonkers Strong, no city is close to us when it comes to economic development. Much of our economy came to a screeching halt last spring as the entire nation locked down. Unemployment rose to a new high of nearly 20%, businesses and restaurants shut their doors, construction sites shut down and we were left wondering what the future held.

Instead of cowering, Yonkers forged ahead. As soon as restrictions loosened, we charged out of the gates with our Generation Yonkers Back to Business campaign, boasting to residents, visitors and businesses that our doors were open once again. We streamlined outdoor dining permits and launched a small business assistance program to aid those impacted by the pandemic so they could get back on their feet.

Just over the last six months, I've had the privilege of taking part in a half a dozen groundbreaking and ribbon cuttings. I'm happy to report that in less than one year, Yonkers' unemployment rate has already fallen back to 8%. And hitting the mark this year is news of Target finding a home at Cross County. After 25 years of looking for the perfect site in Yonkers, they found it at one of the most successful shopping centers in the country. This year also will see the completion of Avalon Bay and the rise of Extell, adding more residential units in downtown and transforming our waterfront to a more walkable and transformative community, or as I like to call it – "Yonkers on the River." The housing market is even taking notice of our successes. We recently were rated the top suburb with the most new apartments in NY State.

But, we are not done yet with the downtown. We are doubling down on our investments at the City Pier and in Getty Square, investing over \$2 million on repairs, streetscaping and beautifying the area. And 2021 will see the rise of Lionsgate, which is developing a Studio Complex at iPark near Larkin Plaza. The state-of-the art movie and television studio will feature a multi-use retail component. When all is complete, Yonkers will benefit from 400 additional permanent jobs from the \$150 million project.

And folks, Yonkers will officially claim the title "Hollywood on the Hudson" when news breaks of the arrival of another big name film company to be announced soon. That's all I can share for now...stay tuned!

Interest in Yonkers extends beyond the downtown. When MGM Resorts International purchased Empire City Casino two years ago, Yonkers was able to reignite plans for a national resort that will see a world class casino take shape, along with a hotel, entertainment venues, and convention center in what is now vacant land or parking lots.

The benefits for Yonkers are endless. MGM has pledged to institute job training programs for local residents, create thousands of new jobs that pay a living wage and have full benefits, and be a good corporate citizen in every way. And, once MGM has a full casino license, Yonkers will see additional revenues. Only one thing stands between MGM getting a full casino license now or having to wait another two years, and that is a change in state law. Yonkers stands behind MGM as they seek to move up the schedule. Why should Yonkers wait for new jobs and additional education dollars to come to our City? So come on Albany, let's make it happen now.

Economic revitalization also includes the redeveloping of our municipal housing stock. Among the many highlights this year is the near completion of the renovation of its 1,700 units. There is also the six-phased plan to redevelop the long distressed public housing complex known as Cottage Gardens. Together, the six phases will result in a public-private investment of \$236 million.

Looking into 2021, we can finally talk about the redevelopment of the long abandoned Longfellow Middle School. We are seeing a large spike in seniors so Longfellow is tapped to become senior housing, allowing for 60 affordable units. A special thank you to MHA's new director, Wilson Kimball and the MHA board for spearheading these renewal projects.

Yonkers remains strong in arts and entertainment as well. Our very own Hudson River Museum continues to raise its profile with world-class exhibitions and is now ready for the next big step as we partner with the County Government in building a new West Wing. This \$12 million project will vastly increase the Museum's space. I want to thank County Executive George Latimer and our County Legislators for collaborating with the City to make this happen.

I believe public art is a reflection of the values of a community. Yonkers' growing arts scene speaks volumes about our appreciation of unique expression. Of course, you can't miss this year's timely and meaningful addition to the scene—Jacqueline Rivera's "United Together" mural, highlighting the Mayor's Disability Advisory Board and the strength in our diversity.

This fall, we will unveil the completed Enslaved Africans' Rain Garden along our waterfront. Over ten years in the making, Yonkers artist Vinnie Bagwell's urban-heritage tribute to the first enslaved Africans to be freed by law in the United States will symbolize our city's commitment to learn from our storied history.

We continue to enhance our public libraries as well. Our public libraries have been an instrumental resource during the last year -- from hosting over 1,400 virtual programs reaching 23,000 participants, to proudly being among the only libraries in the region that remained open for in-branch services during the pandemic. They even launched the Yonkers News Archive – preparing a repository of over 1.2 million pages of digitized newsprint from local papers like the *Herald Statesmen*.

I want to make special note of the Library's Director, Jesse Montero, who joined us last year. Jesse came to Yonkers after a 15-year career at Brooklyn Public Library. I am confident Jesse will lead Yonkers Public Library into the next decade. Thank you, Jesse, for making us Yonkers Strong!

Quality of life remains a top priority, and parks are an essential part of providing it. We are paying special attention to our neighborhood parks. Some improvements include a renovated baseball field at Richter, new tennis courts at Welty, a new bocci court at Coyne, and new playgrounds and courts at Hillside-Wasicsko and Barton Parks. Our furry friends even got a park to call their own at Riverdale and Culver Street. Perhaps one of the more special features installed this year is the new state-of-the-art soccer mini pitch at Stefanik Park. Thank you to the U.S. Soccer Foundation who helped us transform an underutilized area into a recreational play space for our community to enjoy.

Our largest park restoration this year is at JFK Marina. After 15 years of cordoned off eroding bulkhead and sinkholes along the water, the city invested \$8 million to return the waterfront back to the public. With new fishing piers, new fencing, topsoil and grass, it is now a more visitor friendly space for our residents to enjoy the Hudson River. Thank you to the Parks and Engineering departments for restoring our park to its former glory.

We also revived a long abandoned park with the help of our community partners. Thanks to Groundwork Hudson Valley, Bank of America, we reestablished Smith O'Hara Levine Park in southwest Yonkers. A park that had become overgrown and filled with garbage is now home to the Yonkers Greenway Playground on the grounds of the old Yonkers railway. From there, we now are extending a 2.4 mile multi-use recreational trail that will connect Van Cortlandt Park to the Yonkers Train Station, running along the former Putnam Rail line and city streets. With proposed bike lanes in the mix along the trail, we anticipate increased economic activity up and down the Yonkers Greenway.

The gem of all our parks remains Untermyer Gardens, which is also the #1 attraction in Westchester County. This year we are beginning design work for the restoration of the Temple of the Sky and the Persian Pool. Special thanks to Stephen Byrns, president of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, for leading the ongoing transformation of this majestic park that holds so much of city's history.

When it comes to our environment, Yonkers continues to be the gold standard. Over the last nine years, we've become the first municipality in New York to completely convert its city lights to LED; the first city in New York State to launch a zero emission shared electric scooter program; the city with Westchester's largest green fleet; led the successful effort against oil barge anchorages off our waterfront; the first city in the country to power a park solely on wind and solar energy; and the first city in Westchester to propose a plan to reduce our dependence on plastic and paper bags and provide free reusable bags to residents.

But we're not resting on our laurels. In 2020, I signed an executive order to make alternative fuel vehicles the standard for our light-duty city vehicles, which will further reduce our fuel use and carbon emissions. Over the next three years, over 40 hybrid city vehicles will be purchased and hit the streets. Yonkers is the first big city in NY to issue such a progressive order in greening its fleet.

We are even making the leap to electric vehicles, specifically with our police fleet. This spring, you may see a Tesla on patrol in your neighborhood. If we find this as a feasible option, you might spot more later this year. With the help of federal grants, we also are looking to purchase electric powered garbage trucks, dump trucks and even a bucket truck. These would be the city's first heavy vehicles to be 100% electric. To support the increase in EV usage, over 100 new charging ports are planned for installation in the city. Now, that's Yonkers Strong!

Renewable energy sources like solar continues to increase in Yonkers as well. To capitalize on the growing demand for solar energy, we plan to install solar panels at many of our city properties with the goal of creating clean energy to residents. The system is expected to generate up to 3 megawatts of solar power and bring the City hundreds of thousands of dollars in annual revenue. The program also gives participating households up to a 10% credit off their utility bills. We are excited to announce Yonkers' first Community Solar project, located in the Executive Blvd. area. It is set to go live soon and offer 400 residents an opportunity to subscribe.

And we are not done yet. Earlier this month, the Yonkers City Council approved legislation that would make Yonkers the largest municipal member in Sustainable Westchester's 'Westchester Power' program. This will allow the City to pursue a 100% emission-free clean energy supply for all Con Edison customers in Yonkers. Special thanks to the Yonkers City Council led by City Council President Mike Khader for helping us transition to clean energy. Because of our actions to address climate change, I am proud to announce that Yonkers has been designated a Climate Smart Community by New York State.

We also strive for innovative technology to make Yonkers more accessible. This year we launched WaterSmart – an online portal that helps Yonkers property owners track their water usage and pay their bills. When you sign up, you see detailed customer information and consumption analytics. You also are able to receive automated alerts to help you save money and water. That's more money in your pocket, all while being good stewards of our environment.

We are also making it easier for you to view and pay your property taxes online. There's no hassle with this free, real time payment option to pay current and past due cycles on your tax bill. Save on postage or gas since there is no need to visit us at City Hall anymore -- although we'd love to see you!

Seeing you and others is something we took for granted just a year ago. We long for the days of old and seeing you in our hallways, our restaurants and businesses. The pandemic has limited us in so many ways, but it also proved to me just how resilient and strong this city is.

Even though many of us hit pandemic fatigue, Yonkers is still going strong. As vaccines roll out across the country, we are ensuring our residents are top priority. I am pleased to share that Yonkers's own vaccination hub at the Armory has already vaccinated over 10,000 Westchester residents. Add to that, our Municipal Housing Authority arranged for senior residents to visit a pop up vaccination site at Nodine Hill. Yonkers also is the first city in the state now to bring the vaccine directly to homebound seniors. Special thanks to the Office for the Aging for organizing this program with partners Ro healthcare and New York State. Well over 1,500 homebound seniors already have been vaccinated! I want to give a special thank you to our Governor Andrew Cuomo and our Yonkers State delegation led by Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart Cousins for helping get Yonkers residents on the road to recovery.

The pandemic has only highlighted the healthcare disparities in our community, specifically with minorities, immigrants and disabled residents. That's why I encouraged the formation of Yonkers' newest community group, the Health Equity Task Force. Led by YMCA's Lucria Ortiz and community activist Cheryl Brannan, this committee seeks to expand access to health care for the most vulnerable residents in our city. Thank you to the members for your commitment to the well-being of our residents.

We also reengaged our efforts to better serve our young residents. With the help of Westchester County, we reinstated the Yonkers Youth Bureau that will serve youth and their families. This investment will pay itself forward for years to come. Just look at the great work our young people have already created. Fifteen-year-old Yonkers Public Schools student Dylan Bicierro designed the Board's new logo! Well done!

2020 also became a year of the pivot. We all had to reapproach ways to serve you while under the dark cloud of a global pandemic. While managing the impacts of COVID-19, we were forced to reevaluate how to obtain a fair count of the city

population. The 2020 Census is personal to me. I often boast Yonkers being the 4th largest city in the State, but I believe we actually are the 3rd largest, well ahead of our friends to the north in the City of Rochester. Wouldn't it be a great title to claim? All kidding aside, a fair and accurate count does more for us than bragging rights. It gives us more funding for our schools, our infrastructure, healthcare and social programs and even stronger representation at the nation's capital. Our Yonkers Counts team worked tirelessly to canvas the city to ensure participation. Because we were limited in our ability visit you door to door, we enlisted new, creative ways to count you. I'm sure many of you are glad to no longer hear my voice being blasted on the a loud speaker through your neighborhood. In all, we proved ourselves to be strong despite any obstacles we faced. I look forward to sharing the results of the 2020 Census with you once we receive them...and hopefully to celebrate our newest claim to fame!

In one year's time, we lived through months filled with lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing, masks and zoom calls. And for some of us, we lived through unspeakable heartache after losing loved ones to COVID-19. For me, I lost my dear friend, Yonkers Police Detective Billy Sullivan. We lost Billy and hundreds of good, honest, hardworking people who called Yonkers home, who had dreams still yet to fulfill and one more hug to give.

For Billy and for so many of our family and friends, I ask you to join me in a moment of silence to honor them and their memory....Thank you.

I know the pandemic has taken a lot from us, but I believe it has taught us so much more. When COVID-19 first hit us and devastated our hospitals and our most vulnerable residents, we rolled up our sleeves, participated in dozens of food banks, delivered thousands of meals and donated truckloads of PPE to those in need.

I am proud how city employees defined the word strength. The pandemic has not stopped them from providing services you deserve. Our parks department made sure that we got moving, not letting quarantines and social distancing prevent us from exercising our bodies and minds. They've already hosted over 300 virtual programs and dozens of fun outdoor programs to get our kids and seniors on their feet! Our DPW crews revealed their ingenuity retrofitting fire and sanitation trucks into disinfectant units, spraying solution on bus stops, sidewalks and high trafficked areas across the city. Our men in blue galvanized forces to collect PPE and medical supplies for communities in need. Our HR department brought mobile COVID-19 testing to the workplace and arranged telework accommodations to employees. Our

Department of Veterans Services helped coordinate vaccinations for over 50 vets and their spouses. Our Office for the Aging distributed over 72,000 home delivered meals and almost 20,000 pantry boxes to our seniors with the support of our Yonkers Firefighters and local National Guard.

It's been said that if you want to go somewhere fast, go alone, but if you want to go somewhere far, go together. This might be one of the greatest lessons learned from this year -- that together, we are stronger than ever.

Each one of you played a part, whether large or small. And by working together we accomplish so much more than we would by working alone.

As I look at the politics that seem to be dividing our country nationally, I always marvel at how in Yonkers, Democrats, Republicans, independents, and people of all philosophies keep it civil, keep it constructive, and keep it neighborly.

We build up, rather than tear down.

It's why we are stronger in graduation rates.

It's why we are stronger in providing the best public safety in the country.

It's why we are stronger in attracting new investment and creating jobs.

It's why we are stronger in our diversity.

Most of all, it's why we've been strong in holding each other up, during the most complicated, and devastating year in our lifetime.

They say people are always looking for the shining city on the hill. Yonkers is built on seven hills. While we still have neighborhoods that need investment, schools that need more support, and have so many hard working residents still searching for their share of the American Dream -- each of those seven hills and the valleys in between, shine with a spirit of determination, generosity, and respect for one another that glows brighter than any other corner of this great country. It's because Yonkers is that shining city.

Thank you so much.

May God Bless you and God Bless the City of Yonkers. Good night.



MAYOR MIKE SPANO

